Exponent II

SHARING MORMON WOMEN'S VOICES SINCE 1974

WINTER 2019 | VOL. 38 NO. 3

TABLE OF CONTENTS

05
LETTER FROM THE EDITOR
WRESTLING
Pandora Brewer

06
LORD I BELIEVE; I DON'T KNOW IF THAT'S ENOUGH
Heidi Toth

08
ARTIST FEATURE
ILLUSTRATING SCRIPTURE
Interview with Annie Poon

12
SINGING THE LORD'S SONG IN A FOREIGN LAND
Lauren Ellison

15
POETRY
I'M FINE
Nikole York

16
ETERNAL MONOGAMY AS A DIVINE PRINCIPLE
Cherie Pedersen

18
FOR GOD HAS NOT GIVEN US THE SPIRIT OF FEAR
Laurel Madsen

ABOUT EXPONENT II

Exponent II provides a forum for Mormon women to share their life experiences in an atmosphere of trust and acceptance. This exchange allows us to better understand each other and shape the direction of our lives. Our common bond is our connection to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and our commitment to women. We publish this magazine as a living history in celebration of the strength and diversity of women.

COVER ART

EXCAVATOR | JAQUILYN SHUMATE

Somewhere inside of me, she was calling out. From way deep down in an unexplored crevice. What started as a gentle whisper gradually became a rhythmic chant. When I went inside of myself to seek out the voice, there was a familiarity in her tone. I couldn't place it, but I sensed she knew me. And I had known her. Adventurer, nurturer, lover, fighter, and Creator. I dove down deep, and when I finally found Her I saw myself clearly for the first time. Limitless. *See more of Jaquilyn's work from the series on pgs. 12-13.*

jaquilynshumate.com | @jaquilynshumate

21
STUDY IT OUT
Lindsay Denton

23
POETRY
THE LAMENT OF LABAN
Jack Christensen

24
WOMEN'S WORK
AN UNCONVENTIONAL STUDY OF HOLY TEXTS
Interview with Jana Riess

28
SABBATH PASTORALS
LOCATION, LIBERATION, AND CHRIST'S ATONEMENT
Paula Baker

32
BRICK AND MARTYR
Stephanie Sorenson

EDITORIAL STAFF

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Margaret Olsen Hemming

MANAGING EDITOR
Pandora Brewer

ART EDITOR
Page Turner

LAYOUT DESIGNER/ EDITOR
Rosie Gochnour Serago

EXPONENT GENERATIONS EDITOR
Emily Updegraff

SABBATH PASTORALS EDITOR
Fara Sneddon

POETRY EDITOR
Dayna Patterson

GLOBAL ZION EDITOR
Liz Charles

BOOK REVIEW EDITOR
Sydney Pritchett

SUBSCRIPTION MANAGER
Kirsten Campbell

PROOFREADERS
Susannah Bingham Buck, Cherie Pedersen, Karen Rosenbaum and Molly Wunderli

EXPONENT II EXECUTIVE BOARD

PRESIDENT
Barbara Christiansen

TREASURER
Susan Christiansen

SECRETARY
Kirsten Campbell

MEMBERS
Pandora Brewer, Barbara Christiansen, Susan Christiansen, Emily Gray, Margaret Olsen Hemming, Libby Potter Boss, Carrie Salisbury and Heather Sundahl

EMERITUS BOARD
Emily Clyde Curtis, Nancy Dredge, Judy Dushku, Aimee Evans Hickman, Linda Hoffman Kimball, Deborah Farmer Kris, Caroline Kline and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich

SUBMIT TO EXPONENT II

We welcome personal essays, articles, poetry, fiction, and book reviews for consideration. Please email submissions to exponentiiart@gmail.com or mail them to *Exponent II*, 219 South Louis Street, Mount Prospect, IL 60056. Please include your name and contact information. Submissions received by mail will not be returned.

We are always looking for artwork and photography to accompany our writing. Please send jpegs or gifs of art submissions to exponentiiart@gmail.com. If you are interested in illustrating articles, please contact us for specific assignments.

SPECIAL THANKS

Thank you to Bea Hurd, Kathryn Knudsen, Annie Poon, Elizabeth Sanchez, Jaquilyn Shumate, Lesli Summers-Stay and Heather Ruttan for their artwork in this issue.

Exponent II (ISSN 1094-7760) is published quarterly by Exponent II. Exponent II has no official connection with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Articles published represent the opinions of authors only and not necessarily those of the editor or staff.

Copyright © 2019 by Exponent II, Inc. All rights reserved.

WRESTLING

PANDORA BREWER

And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. — Genesis 32:24-28

I taught Gospel Doctrine class for twelve years. Over those years my teaching style evolved. At first I did what I thought was expected. I studied for hours and outlined the most brilliant presentation of life-changing themes. I quickly realized two critical things. One, being brilliant about life-changing themes was hubris and unsustainable. And two, my class was boring and no one learned anything.

I tried a different approach. There is a corporate training adage that says, "The intelligence is in the room." This assumes that, as a collective, the participants know all the answers. The teacher is a facilitator who orchestrates a learning experience where these insights can be shared. In experimenting with this invitation style, I also noticed that most of my students had only a cursory understanding of the text, even if they had read it several times. This lack of engagement was often manifest by reducing all discussion to pseudo-profound platitudes or dismissive silence because we were not meant to comprehend the meaning.

My inspiration was the story of Jacob and the Angel. This narrative is a dare, a gauntlet thrown in how to read the scriptures. We wrestle with the text. I love the physicality of this language. Jacob refuses to let the spiritual confrontation end until he has been blessed, until he has learned something that will change him. By giving him a new name, the Angel transforms Jacob, now Israel, creating for him a new trajectory in a world that Israel will now see differently. But Israel insists not only on a blessing but knowledge, he wants to see the face of God. None of this comes easily. It is a fight, a discourse, an unfolding, a wrestle with the unknown.

How could I infuse this level of engagement into a 40-minute discussion every Sunday?

I translated the story of Jacob and the Angel into my own class formula. I planned the following lesson each week: Disperse and students read sections of the assigned text aloud. Savor the language, define unfamiliar words, swoon over beautiful poetry. Discuss what is happening in and around the narrative — add historical context, primary sources and speculated authorship. Discuss the Christian action, intent, and/or the greater purpose - why was this included in our scriptures? Share what this means to us outside of the text, what action will we take, what will we do differently, having read and understood? How will we change our name?

Sometimes we had productive discussions. Sometimes I was reported to the Bishop. Sometimes the careful reading uncovered troubling questions no one wanted to talk about. Sometimes however, someone would experience a dawning so bright, we were dazzled by the power of the author's voice, transcending time with an unexpected relevance.

The theme for this year's contest invited writers to wrestle with the scriptures. The responses illustrate meaningful scriptorial encounters that leave the writer and readers transformed. This collection includes Lindsay Denton's essay about the effort of seeking revelation through study (D&C 9:8), Heidi Toth's essay about whether her imperfect faith is enough (Mark 9:23-24), and Lauren Ellison's essay about the challenge of parenting a child struggling with addiction (Alma 5:26). The issue also includes an artist feature with Annie Poon, whose work has been featured in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and whose book "Draw Your Way Through the Book of Mormon" will appear in April. The winning essay, "Brick and Martyr" by Stephanie Sorensen, describes her personal journey of recovering from a childhood steeped in polygamist patriarchal abuse.

This individual activity of interacting with text often reveals the universal desire for humans to connect with each other and with the divine. A class becomes a metaphor for our community. Essays and artwork express and reach out in support of the community. And the wrestle illuminates our everyday struggle to know how to live, to live better, and to live engaged with God.

LORD I BELIEVE; I DON'T KNOW IF THAT'S ENOUGH

HEIDI TOTH

I love a good semicolon.

Nowhere is that underappreciated piece of punctuation — used to separate and yet forever link two independent thoughts–wielded as effectively as it is by the apostle Mark when he relates the story of a father asking for mercy, who, in one breath, declares both his faith and his doubt. A semicolon highlights the dichotomy of this desperate man's plea: "Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief."

I relate to this man. Increasingly in recent years, I find myself on both sides of the semicolon: Lord, I sustain the prophet; help me make sense of the disconnect I feel with some of his counsel. Lord, I know you see women and men as equals; explain to me how women and men can possibly be equal on this earth when the Church gives only men the right to preside in the home and the Church and gives women so few opportunities to be heard and their influence seen. Lord, I love general conference; now, help stop the tears that come every time a man says the right way to be a woman is to be a mother, and if you can't actually be a mother then you must want to be a mother more than anything else. Lord, I love the community of saints I have found on the Internet; make my fingers cramp up so I can't go on a tweetstorm about the man who, in response to my expression of isolation, quoted scripture at me and called me wicked. Lord, I love this Church and never want to leave; help me find where I belong, a community where I fit, a little corner where I am neither invisible nor a misfit.

Lord, I believe; is that enough?

For a long time, I've been able to compartmentalize these two sides. Over here is my faith — my testimony of the gospel, hard-won through prayer, time spent in the scriptures and in the temple, and knocking on doors as a missionary; my love of the Book of Mormon; my experiences receiving and acting on personal revelation and following the revelation of leaders; the knowledge that every ward of which I've been a part has been filled with good people who were trying, as I was, to walk their covenant path. Over there are my qualms — gender roles that match neither my life nor my understanding of heavenly parents; the treatment of our LGBTQ brothers and sisters; what to my eyes looks like the quashing of dissent; the meetings at every level where women are shut out or participate only minimally or, perhaps worse, the meetings where my soul aches for a spiritual feast yet is left wanting.

The compartments have been there for a while. Into the faith box went the powerful spiritual witness I received, unsought, of an apostle's prophetic calling when I sustained him in the Conference Center. Into the qualms box went that Sunday morning almost a decade later when, while walking my dog and listening to this apostle speak, I startled a runner when I yelled at the sky in anger as this apostle compared abortion to the Holocaust. On the faith side, I have the strength I felt as a missionary, the authority I exercised with confidence as a Relief Society president, the revelation I received when I taught the words of God from scripture or when I read *Where the Wild Things Are* to a Sunbeam class. But the other box holds the priesthood executive council where I asked why women never spoke last in sacrament meeting, only to have the first counselor in the bishopric respond sarcastically that obviously it was because they thought less of women. There was the general authority who compared the trial of being single to the trial of having a mental illness. In that box is the day I learned the Mormon Tabernacle Choir would sing at the inauguration of a man who bragged about committing sexual assault, the day a priesthood holder apologized to a man accused of sexual assault after being too afraid even to speak to the woman who had accused him, and the day I went to the dedication of the Tucson temple, my soul in need of peace after a woman was killed at a neo-Nazi rally the day before, only to leave with one indelible memory — the moment where six intelligent, accomplished, righteous women were reduced to three words: "and their wives."

In that box is every talk that uses motherhood as code for good womanhood and every speaker who says all women are nurturing and all women are mothers. Marriage, motherhood — to the single woman in God's kingdom, these

concepts seem to be wielded as weapons. It's impossible not to wonder what I have done wrong. And yet, in my faith box is the knowledge that life is good, that my heavenly parents have blessed me with talents, financial stability, independence, curiosity, and a certain brazenness that, if nothing else, leads to good stories. The life I am living now is not a placeholder until a man proposes and my real life begins, nor is it a slog to eternity so I can finally be happy. I am happy now. One of those times of personal revelation was a poignant moment when I felt God's arms around me and knew he loved me, no asterisks needed.

With such a box of doubts and qualms — and even more unlisted — after years of tears and rejection, why do I remain a member? A few reasons — Mormon guilt is one. Having made temple covenants with my whole heart, I fear the pain and guilt I might feel if I walked away. I worry I will lose my family for eternity. Some part of me sees leaving as a betrayal, like spitting on the Savior as He suffered. But more than the guilt is my knowledge of God and eternity. Six weeks after my father died, while doing baptisms for the dead, I had a distinct sense that he taught the woman whose ordinance I was doing. I walked out of the font with no doubt about the spirit world and the plan of salvation. Amid all the doubts, I cling to that one unassailable moment when the veil was thin.

But mostly, I stay because I believe the gospel. I no longer say, "I know the church is true," but I can say, with my whole-yet-broken heart, that I believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ. I believe my Savior when He commits to help me in my doubt, fear, weakness, and sorrow. The Atonement can help me to be like Him.

Is that enough for the rest of my life? I don't know. When I think of another 50 years of not fitting in, of sitting alone, of cycling between invisibility one week and having all eyes on me the next after saying something shocking or of making the choice to be honest or to protect myself — well, it's exhausting. When I imagine another 100 general conferences, knowing I'll hear from 20 times as many men as women and that the standard for womanhood that will be upheld will be something I am not, I just don't know. I hope it is enough. I want it to be.

I love the gospel. I love the Church. (*Lord, I believe.*) I am afraid to find my place in the Church on this Earth; I will have to cut off a part of myself to make myself fit. I am not sure I can do this. Or maybe, simply by still being a member despite every concern, I already have. (*Help thou my unbelief.*)

"A Little Girl" | Bea Hurd | @beayond_art

ILLUSTRATING SCRIPTURE

INTERVIEW WITH ARTIST ANNIE POON

Why or how did you decide to become an artist?

At Christmas time, my parents would take all nine of us kids in our 15-passenger van to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to see the angel tree. So as far back as I can remember, museums have always been a special place. In kindergarten, my teacher Mrs. Danoff held up a chart with drawings of various occupations. She said, "You can become any of these things — which will you be?" So I decided, in that moment at age five, to be an artist. My mom even took me out of school one day to visit the MET, leaving a note for the teacher that I was getting an "artistic education."

Then, when I visited the Museum of Modern Art in high school, I was very moved by Jackson Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm*. It is a massive action painting that takes up a whole wall and is in its own room. I wanted to capture that energy and be a powerful female artist among all these men, these giants of the art world. I wanted to become a famous painter in the collection of the MoMA. I started skipping lunch and going to the art section of the high school library to read artists' monographs instead of socializing with my friends. I read every biography of an artist that I could find. I inhaled them, hoping to adopt these artists' work ethic and path. That was where I got most of my art education, on the floor of that library at Highland Park High School.

I do have a piece in the MoMA's collection now, but it is not an amazing or powerful painting; it is exactly what I would have drawn as a child with no great ambition other than to play or explore. A simple black and white animation based on a memory from when I was little. That simple style has been a pattern for my later work.

How would you describe your artistic process?

I have a collection of what I would call "Key Images" in my mind, impressions that have built up because of my early experiences. They have great significance to me, but I don't try to puzzle out why. These key images range from impressions from children's books to myself and my twin swimming in a coral reef. The impressions include a drawing I made once of myself surrounded by spikes, the image of me lying sick on a couch, and the thought of Christ touching my eyes with mud. The images are diverse but relatively few in number. They are what remain when their context has slipped from my memory.

In my process, I select a key image and play a game of free association with it, making whatever drawings come to mind. I don't censor the impressions or deem anything that comes out as unimportant. Each of my works (or bodies of work) comes from free association with a single key image. The work I then produce is something I don't always understand but comforts me. More meaning emerges as I talk about the piece with others. I don't rule out their interpretations because my work is, after all, a part of a collective experience.

Tell me what it's like to be a Mormon female artist.

I feel I entered the Mormon art world at a specific time in our church history, when a large group of aspiring women artists and curators looked around them and said "I can do this — not just equal, but surpass!" I can't explain what made that possible — maybe it was because BYU made such an effort to focus on contemporary art or because of the anniversary of President Benson's talk "The Vision of the Arts."

These tools have prepared Mormon women to claim notice. We are blowing up Instagram! It's a time of great confidence. A time where we are standing up and crowning each other as queens and not waiting for a collector or museum to validate us. Whether mothers or no, we are finding the time and making the moves we need to be successful in our own eyes. We are contacting each other over social media or inviting each other into shows, reaching out when something one of us does has great meaning to the others. It's not a clique; it's an attitude of welcoming any and all to the queendom, this place we are creating. It's a beautiful time to be a Mormon female artist.

Tell me about your series of scriptural illustrations. How did you choose which verses to illustrate?

My scripture illustration series started out merely as an exercise to help me find my 50 favorite verses in the book of Mormon. It was for my etching series. I read the book again

"Baptism" | Annie Poon

I re-read each of those verses and then close my eyes.

Will a fragment or whole image pop into my head? I think,

"What if this verse was written by *me* about *myself?"*

Then it gets interesting and I find a surprising image.

over a period of a couple of months, making one sketch per chapter of the book. Once I finished the book, I had selected my favorites but still had hundreds of other drawings. And I couldn't stop illustrating — even when my official work had moved on to other projects.

Now a couple of years later, I've illustrated the entire standard works with the exception of the Old Testament, which I have begun and will complete in five years. For my process, I kneel down with a sketchbook and say a short prayer that I will inspire others, but most importantly inspire myself. Then, as I read on my phone, I mark several verses. I re-read each of those verses and then close my eyes. Will a fragment or whole image pop into my head? I think, "What if this verse was written *by* me *about* myself?" Then it gets interesting and I find a surprising image.

The sparseness of the black-and-white medium you use gives, to me, a feeling of despair over many of your scriptural illustrations. That's enhanced by the sometimes surprising images of sadness to accompany verses that wouldn't necessarily be associated with sadness. I'm thinking particularly about 2 Nephi 31:12. What were your reasons for that?

In the picture you mentioned, a little girl sits dripping in shallow water, presumably after baptism, with a bird on her head. Her eyes are closed. She looks sad; her eyes are closed and lips parted. But she is not sad. Her thoughts are turned inward. She is me. I am remembering my own baptism. I am enjoying the cold dripping sensations and sounds, the feeling of the cool wet clothes, the stillness of the moment alone in the changing room after baptism.

I was diagnosed with schizophrenia several years ago. The struggle to stay healthy, balanced with the terrifying black jagged visions, depression, etc., had me in a state of permanent melancholy and grief. After much struggling, I had to face the fact that I would never get better. So through the years I became at home in that state of melancholy and started to find beauty and poetry in expressing this grief. Black and white became a subject in itself, a sign of mental polarity and the weaving together of the good with the bad. The emotions I started expressing became something that others latched onto, related to.

It occurs to me now that one of my favorite artists, Kathe Kollwitz, did the same thing in her artistic reaction to World War II. She responded by drawing grim self-portraits and scenes of searching for loved ones on the battlefield eerily lit by her single lantern. They were all in black and white. The pictures are so sad. But the intensity of the expressed emotion gives them a power and beauty that strongly attracts me to them.

By expressing my reaction to my illness, I wasn't stuck in a fruitless attempt to change the situation. I was trying to lessen its force by drawing people near to me through my art. It worked, and countless women have reached out to me over the years with stories or simple expressions of gratitude.

Then again, Jacob 3:5, a verse I wouldn't normally find funny, made me laugh at loud. How did you choose naked women dancing for that?

When I was little, my perception of "whoredoms" came from a Bollywood movie I saw where a sultan enjoyed his harem of hundreds of colorfully dressed concubines. It seemed like such a funny community of women! Just lounging around on cushions, singing and dancing in pj's all day, waiting for that special moment. And getting so little attention from the sultan. When I came to this verse, "And concubines they should have none," I thought of that silly movie. I drew the women dancing naked because I often find it a pity to obscure the human form with clothing.

Do you find that you read scripture differently after you've undertaken illustrating it?

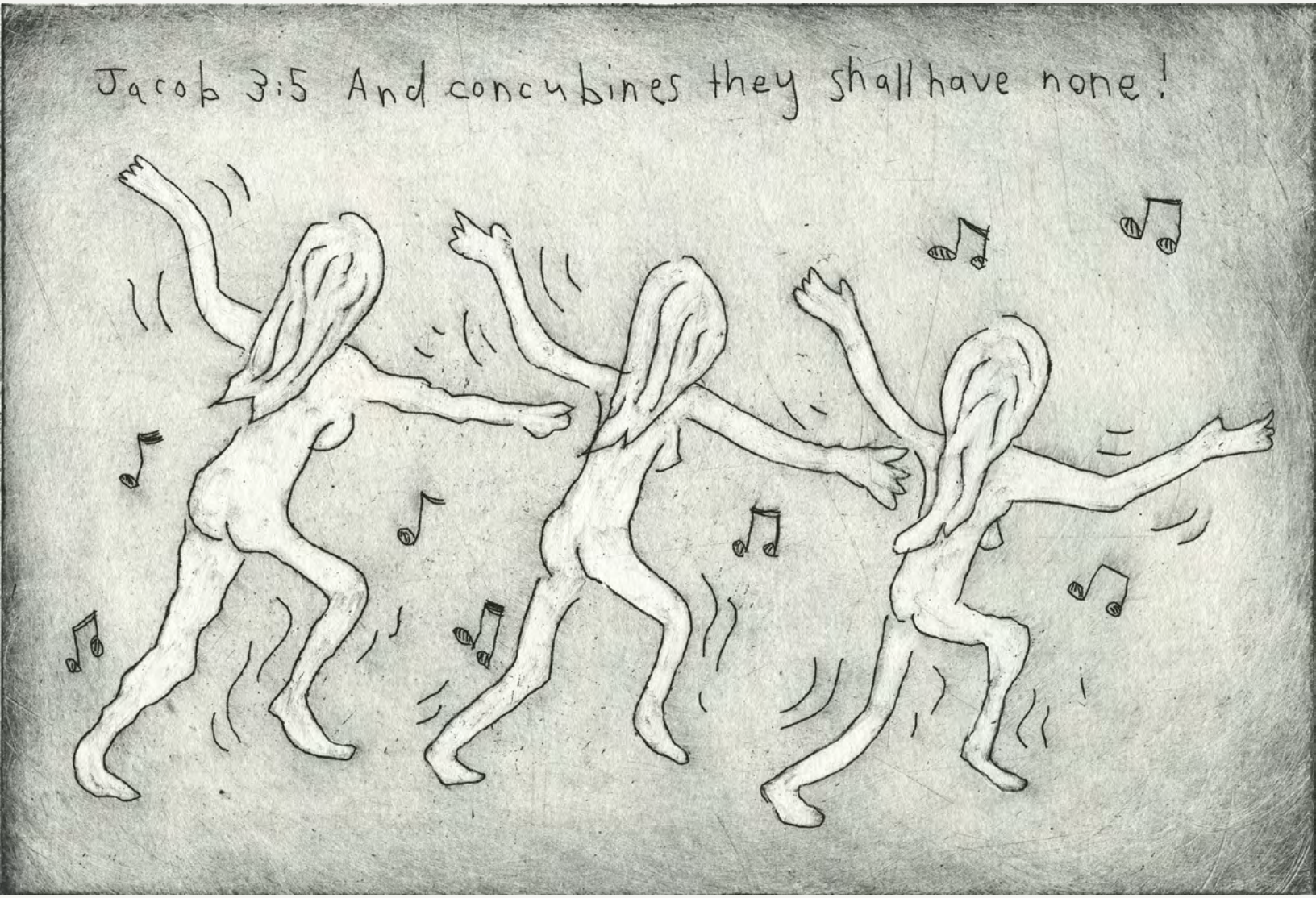
Yes, for example, I really engaged with the passage in 3 Nephi about children being filled with the Holy Ghost, surrounded by pillars of fire. After depicting the babies as little flaming embers, I started thinking more about the baptism by fire. Now when I think of/illustrate a person feeling the Holy Ghost, I depict them engulfed in purifying flames. This is a great example of the polarity so key to my original message — in this case the fire could be danger but also represents peaceful purification.

What is it like to try to read the Book of Mormon through the eyes of a child? What do you enjoy about the way children understand scripture?

For my recent book, *Draw Your Way Through the Book of Mormon*, I didn't focus on the characters or events as much as I focused on how easy it is to get a picture of the whole plan of salvation — all by focusing on a few key scriptures. When a child makes the decision to be baptized, it is truly a choice, and we believe and hope they have mastered the basics even at that early age of eight. So reading through

the eyes of a child means celebrating the supreme, simple message of the scriptures, the simple message of Christ's salvation. And children feel that message deeply without necessarily needing to know more. It reminds me that, like a child, I already know all I need to be ready to meet Christ one day.

I was three and four. Children's drawings become strong little hooks that connect them to Christ's message later on when they look back. They give the whole church experience a wondrous, magical tinge. It's a tangible link to Christ's gospel that they can always have and remember.



"Concubines" | Annie Poon

***Draw Your Way Through the Book of Mormon* invites children to participate in the creative process. Why would a child benefit from illustrating the Book of Mormon?**

This answer picks up on what I mentioned earlier about key images. By drawing the scriptures and making them their own, kids can create their own key images and powerful memories. It also invites play into the reading of the scriptures, which every kid enjoys! They may never forget making those drawings. For example, I never forgot drawing in a journal my mom gave me at Family Home Evening when

Annie Poon is an illustrator and animator. Her work *Runway Bathtub* is in the permanent collection of the New York Museum of Modern Art. *Draw Your Way Through the Book of Mormon* will be available in LDS church bookstores in April 2019.

anniepoon.com | @anniepoon

SINGING THE LORD'S SONG IN A FOREIGN LAND

LAUREN ELLISON

Fingers trembling, heart pounding, I tore open the envelope containing the results of my music teacher certification. After years of being a stay-at-home mom, I was about to re-enter the workforce — and in a job I didn't feel especially qualified for. When I'd first been approached to teach piano and music I declined. Not only was I a self-taught, mediocre pianist, but the heavy emphasis on singing with this particular program dissuaded me. I'm not a good singer. How could I teach what I could not do? My eyes quickly scanned the evaluation sheet, and I let out a sigh of nervous relief. Excellent scores in virtually every category . . .then this gentle addendum: "Have you considered taking singing lessons?"

In the scriptures, singing is more than just singing; it is frequently used to praise God and celebrate our relationship with him: "The Lord is my strength and my song; he has given me victory. . . . I shall joyfully sing of your loving kindness. . . . My lips shall greatly rejoice when I sing unto thee; and my soul, which thou hast redeemed."[1] Strength, victory, joy, salvation: "the song of redeeming love," according to Alma.

And, if you have felt to sing it in the past, he asks, "can ye feel so now?"[2]

If not, we often assume sin is the problem. For Alma's audience it seems to have been, as he rails, "Wo unto all ye workers of iniquity; repent, repent!"[3] But there are other reasons that people who used to rejoice in the gospel feel like they can't anymore. What if we do everything right and it doesn't work? Where is my victory and salvation when promises aren't fulfilled? How do I stay strong when my child rejects everything I taught her? How can I rejoice while she suffers?

For me the problem isn't that I don't want to sing. I'm just not sure how to anymore.

"She is Creation" | Jaquilyn Shumate

It was the ward Christmas program. Our five-year-old daughter stood nervously in her pink velvet dress in front of the children's choir, grasping the microphone with both of her small hands, then began to sing: "This is the new star shining so bright, lighting the world on that first Christmas night! This is the angel, proclaiming the birth, singing hosanna and peace on the earth!" Light, peace, redeeming love.

About twelve years later, my husband and I were watching TV when, feeling that something was wrong, we rushed to our daughter's room. We found her passed out on the floor next to an empty vodka bottle, vomit pooled around her beautiful face, caked in her long blond hair. A long night in the hospital. Months of addiction treatment. Years of relapse.

From the day she was born, she was our Sunshine Girl. The nurses at the hospital couldn't get enough of her. They would pop into my room to hold her, wonder at her, offer me name suggestions. She was the only child I had who never had to be coaxed by a photographer: "Smile," they'd say, and she'd

"Wherever Are You?" | Jaquilyn Shumate

light up the room. Walking through the crowded halls at church, people's delighted greetings were inevitably directed at the smiley little person walking between us, holding our hands. We laughed that we'd become invisible, but relished her natural ability to inspire joy in everyone she met.

How had it come to this? Lying in my bed all night crying, knowing what the morning would hold for her. Was I doing the right thing? Wasn't there more we could do for her here in our home? I knew she'd feel angry, betrayed. Maybe we were blowing it out of proportion. Maybe this time she'd keep her promises. Maybe our love was enough. "My soul, my soul! I am in anguish! Oh, the agony of my heart!"[4] Shortly before dawn I heard the front door open, heavy footsteps descending the stairs to the basement. A physically intimidating though kind man and his wife roused our sleepy teenager, explaining that because of her addictions, she needed to come with them to a place she could get help. I watched her leave in the predawn gloom, walking between the couple, to their waiting car, then drive away. I turned and went back to bed. It was my birthday.

"By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion."

In testimony meeting a white-haired grandmother smiled sweetly through her tears of joy. "Being in the temple with all of your children and grandchildren is the sweetest experience you can have! It is heaven on earth! Go to the temple with your family!"

"Our captors asked for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'"

"What does it feel like to have a child leave the Church?" asked the Sunday School teacher. I tuned in, craving connection. After a brief pause came a response: "Sad?" "Yes, it is sad, isn't it?" agreed the teacher and promptly went on with the lesson. Sad? I thought. *Sad?!* All of the anxiety, guilt, agony, hope, disappointment, fear, confusion, depression, betrayal, and more that I had felt over the past years was to be summed up and brushed over by "sad"? The familiar cloud of isolation settled over me.

"How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

Without much faith, I decided to try singing lessons. "You can either sing or you can't," I informed my friend and singing teacher, Amanda. *"I can't."*

"That's *not true!*" she countered. "Trust me. I can teach you to sing." The first thing she did was break me of old habits, forcing me to sing outside my comfortable range by not "trying to make it so 'pretty.' That'll come later."

"If ye have felt to sing the song of redeeming love, can ye feel so now?"

I can't.

"That's not true," whispers a gentle voice. "Trust me. I can teach you to sing." I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the desolate pit. . . *He put a new song in my mouth.*[5] A new song, outside my comfortable range, and not so pretty. But that will come later.

Feeling that something was wrong, I went to my daughter's room and knocked on her door.

She'd been drinking and crying.

"I don't want to talk," she dismissed me. "I'm fine, Mom. Really."

"I'm not leaving you alone tonight."

"I need to smoke."

"OK, let's go outside."

An upward glance of surprise, then down in shame. "You don't want to see me smoke."

"I don't mind."

We went out into the cold, clear winter night and sat silently for a long time, watching the stars "shining so bright."

"Mom," she said quietly, "I love you."

Light, peace, redeeming love.

NOTES:

1. See Psalms 118, 59 and 71
2. Alma 5:26
3. Alma 5:32
4. Jeremiah 4:19 NASB, NIV
5. Psalm 40:1-3 (Italics added)

I'M FINE

NIKOLE YORK

Be pleasant.
Be courteous.
Be cautious.
"Are you okay?'

Everyone asks you, "Are you okay?"
What are you supposed to say?
We are taught to say, "I'm fine,"
Because pain is inconvenient.
It isn't polite to tell someone, "No."
That is not the way that polite conversation goes.
No.
You are supposed to say, "I'm fine,"
And move on with small talk.

Sometimes, I cannot talk small.
Sometimes, my pain is too overwhelming.
Do you walk away?
Or do you say what you need to say?
Do you tell them that
You didn't think that you could get up this morning?
That the ache in your stomach never goes away?
That you didn't think that any one person
Could feel this much sadness when
Circumstance tells them they are fine.
"I'm fine," you say.

Because I'll tell you what happens
When you don't move on.
They tell you it'll be alright.
They tell you to think happy thoughts.
They tell you that it's all in your head.
I know that it'll be alright,
I do think happy thoughts,
But the problem is that
It is all in my head.

Is beating around the bush really
Making anything better?
Why is pain an inconvenience?
We are put on this earth,
We all journey in our own ways,
And pain is inevitable.
Sharing is caring.
But don't share your feelings,
Or your problems,
Or your hopes,
Or your dreams,
Or your tears.
Because they tell you,
They are not real.

Pretend with me.
Pretend for a moment
I shared the feelings
That I keep inside me.
Then you share yours.
We'll take a deep breathe,
A breathe not held back
By the cries our throats hold.
Then we journey together
Into the pain,
Together.

We trade human connection
For politeness,
For small talk,
For pleasantries,
For convenience,
For that little extra happy that
We pretend is going to make the difference.

I am not fine.
You are not fine.
And that's okay.

"Sitting Figures" | Lesli Summers-Stay

ETERNAL MONOGAMY AS A DIVINE PRINCIPLE

CHERIE PEDERSEN

On the bookshelf in our study is a framed picture of a man and two women barefoot on a beach in California. It is the 1980s. The man is bearded, in defiance of a cultural expectation that Mormon men be clean shaven. There are two dark patches on his faded jeans and he stands, hands in pockets, a bemused expression on his face, looking at the photographer. The two women, wearing light jackets and long pants splashed with salt water, stand together to his right. They are smiling. They have been friends for many years, and this day on the beach is a reunion of sorts.

The man is married to one of the women. Unbeknownst to any of them, some 30 years later he will also be married to the other.

I am the other woman, and the photographer taking the picture was my husband, to whom I am sealed.

Our story is not unique. Every day thousands of men and women enter into unforeseen second marriages. In our case, we had both lost our spouses to cancer and come together late in life to marry again, though not in a temple. This time we were married for time, 'til death do us part.

Except the idea of parting after this life is anathema to my husband. "I can't imagine our relationship just ending," he has said many times. "I can't imagine not having you being part of my eternity."

For him, marriage to two women poses no challenge, emotionally or theologically. "I am in love with two women," he says, at times even joking, to my dismay, that he is a polygamist. Unlike me, he has no problem with the concept of polygamy. In his view, Joseph Smith was called to restore all things, polygamy being one of them. That the practice was rife with errors and mistakes of judgment, he attributes to incomplete understanding not only of how the principle was to be carried out, but also of what the term "sealing" actually meant.

Not that we are fundamentalists. He acknowledges that the practice ended with the Manifesto of 1890 — theoretically at least. But like many believing Mormons, or members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, he accepts polygamy as an eternal principle. I do not.

Never mind that my family history was steeped in the practice of polygamy. That my grandmother was the 33rd and last child born to a man who had taken two additional wives — sisters whom he had seen in a vision — following his conversion to the Church. That he willingly went to prison for his beliefs and returned to all three families upon his release. That my grandmother's childhood memories of polygamy had been positive, steeped in a lore of sister wives working together without animosity to help one another with the challenges of keeping house and raising children. Although that great grandfather left behind five journals, none of which recounted any struggle with providing for or keeping peace among those families, his wives did not leave a record of whatever struggles they may have faced. But my woman's heart does not have difficulty imagining what it was like to share a husband.

Robert, the man I married for time, is ironically a feminist like myself who supports me in prayers to Heavenly Parents, and who is as likely to turn to me as to a home teacher when in need of a blessing. He tells me that things will be different after we leave this earth. We will be purer, free from such mortal emotions as jealousy or possessiveness. That may be so. But I already have a beloved husband, Carl, to whom I am sealed and with whom I shared 45 years of my life. What about him?

Pointing to at least once instance of polyandry in early church history, Robert sees no reason why I can't be married to them both. My whole being balks at the idea, especially at the implication that Carl could then have more than one wife. Despite this second marriage, despite the possibility that baser emotions will not be part of our eternal experience, marriage between two individuals remains for me the ideal. Given the Church's current definition of marriage as "between one man and one woman," then there should be no place in our scriptures for D&C 132, where women are described as little more than possessions to be acquired at the whim of a male priesthood bearer. To believe this scripture came from the God I worship is to believe that women really are lesser beings. That my value as a woman lies only in my ability to bear children. And that concept I cannot and will not accept. Like Eve, I choose to pattern my life after a higher principle — in my case, the principle that all are alike unto God, and all are equally beloved and valued.

Do I believe that Joseph Smith was a prophet? Yes. He got too many things right to discredit his role in the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He also got a lot of things wrong. "How could he have gotten something of this magnitude wrong?" questions my husband. I point to Brigham Young and the practice of withholding priesthood and temple blessings from people of color. Of prophets up through Spencer W. Kimball who defended it. Scripture is replete with the actions of prophets who got things wrong. Why should Joseph be any different?

Today I look at the picture on our bookcase not as a prophecy regarding our eternity, but as a reminder that the paths we travel can and do take wonderful and unexpected turns, foreseen only by our God. I have been blessed to love and be loved by two good men. I feel sure that the love we feel for each other will continue in some form beyond the veil and in time all of us who have ever lived on the earth will be sealed together as God's eternal family. But I will be a wife to only one man. As he will be a husband only to me.

FOR GOD HAS NOT GIVEN US THE SPIRIT OF FEAR

LAUREL MCENTIRE MADSEN

When the doctor told me the result of a biopsy on a growth in my colon, he didn't use the words "cancer" or "malignant." Perhaps he wished to spare me — just a little. He said the biopsy was "positive," and that he would make an appointment for surgery within a few days.

Of course he didn't spare me. I knew clearly what a positive biopsy meant, and also understood that surgery was urgent.

A cancer diagnosis is a blow. I was frightened, but I responded by shutting down my emotions. I don't remember much of the days leading to the surgery. A friend brought chicken soup with homemade noodles — a favorite of mine — but I ate it with little awareness of its goodness. I watched spring rain and noted that the world was turning green, but I was indifferent to the beauty. I felt as if I were an observer, rather than a part of the life going on around me.

That numb detachment vanished as I awoke from surgery in which a sizable part of my colon where the tumor resided had been removed. As I made my way to consciousness, I was in such pain from the cutting within me and the incision in my abdomen that it was not possible to be apart from it.

God has promised us comfort in our time of need, and my comforters were all about me. My husband was there, holding my hand in his big, warm ones. He never left me, sleeping for a week in a chair next to my bed. The nurses who cared for me whispered encouragement as they arranged pillows to support the wound in my flesh. "You'll feel better soon." They made sure the morphine flowing into my veins was always enough to make the pain bearable, and they sponged my face with wonderfully cool cloths. My doctor came by each day to check his surgical handiwork and jovially say how well I was doing. My daughter was often there to smile at me and explain how my little grandsons missed their Oma. "Mom, they want you to hurry home! They miss their favorite playmate."

A few days after the surgery, the doctor stayed to talk with me. Although the surgery had gone well, and he had removed all the tumor, biopsies showed that cancer cells had migrated into many lymph nodes, anti-infection structures that carry lymph fluid throughout the body and eventually into the bloodstream. I would require long-term chemotherapy trying to kill all these errant cancer cells. The fear that I had suppressed after diagnosis came to intense life. The doctor saw my quickened breath and tears in my eyes. He leaned in close and said softly and firmly, "This can be cured."

When I came home from the hospital, I tried to hold on to his words, but fear of what the future might bring claimed me. It didn't help that everyone around me was filled with what seemed to me exaggerated cheerfulness. Of course there was also the friend who told me with quivering voice all the horrors of chemo that awaited. "I had a friend who vomited continually," she said. "She got so weak she could not sit up, and she looked just terrible!" Oh, sure, that was just what I needed to hear! My imagination took off at full gallop.

I started chemotherapy a month after surgery: once a week for a year — three or four hours each time — a needle in my vein conveying the poison that would kill the cancer cells. Medicine to alleviate the inevitable nausea flowed into my blood also, but still I was sick each time. There was one positive: the particular chemo for colon cancer did not cause my hair to fall out. I'm afraid that was a blessing not much appreciated at the time. I was dealing with what the chemo did do, making me incredibly, profoundly tired. That's a sickness in itself, to feel that it isn't worth the effort to talk or eat. I couldn't be persuaded to take a short walk with my husband, one of our favorite things to do together.

I had always been a cheerful, enthusiastic person with plenty of energy. I'd gone to graduate school and then taught college classes while raising my four children. The kids and I accompanied my husband to El Salvador when he took a job there for two years. After they were raised, I followed Al to third-world countries for his work, living abroad in often difficult situations that demanded adaptability and fortitude. Yet here I was, letting cancer get the best of me.

"O My Mother" | Heather Ruttan | @ettakay.art

I retreated from reality by refusing to attend any cancer support group, and I would not consider mental therapy. I stopped writing in my journal, which all my life I had used as a sounding board for my feelings. I found it difficult to pray. I would not make any plans beyond the present day, saying that I was just too tired and sick to even think about it. Letters from three of my children who lived in distant places didn't bring comfort, and even visits from my adored little grandsons were not the accustomed joy they always had been. My husband tried to keep my spirits up with exciting plans for travel when I got well, but I was not interested.

I am aware now that it was fear of suffering and death that I was busy suppressing in those days. I couldn't have admitted it, but I was depressed. And then I read a particular scripture from Timothy 1:7 that spoke directly to my darkness. I don't remember how it came to me, since I was not reading scriptures at that point. Did someone give it to me? Did I hear it in a church talk? But those words written to Timothy, a troubled early Christian, by the apostle Paul: *"For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind,"* struck my heart and became a lifeline to courage. As soon as I read it, I acknowledged that my mind was not sound because of fear.

Through the miracle of this scripture, given to me in my time of need, I realized that God was aware of me and my suffering. My fear was not through Him, but came from within me. He promised that with His love, He would give me the power of a sound mind to overcome the frightening thoughts that absorbed me. Almost in spite of myself, I believed that His promises were possible. I summoned up desire to find the ways to receive them.

It was not easy, but was rather gradual progress over time. I repeated the scripture's words, both silently within my mind and out loud. I started to pray once more and began to feel a connection with God. A daily period of meditation, simply another form of prayer, empties the mind of negative thoughts so that the light of God can shine in brought peaceful feelings. And I picked up my scriptures and my journal again, writing down the sacred passages that spoke to me of hope and faith. One of my children sent me a small gratitude journal to note at least one thing every day to give thanks for.

I felt God's comfort, and my life began to lose some of its bleakness. I even regained positive imagination. I pictured funny little beings in my bloodstream who, though rather sweet, had sharp teeth and ran through my veins ferociously chomping up the cancer cells. These little creatures made me smile — I could picture them! I found that I was able to once again laugh at my little grand-boys' funny antics and revel in their arms around my neck. I could even enjoy my husband's trademark silly jokes and wonderful stories.

During this process of healing my mind and spirit, my husband talked me into going to a favorite retreat of ours in the mountains. Our room had huge windows looking out at spectacular mountain peaks. In the morning, I opened the curtains to look out and on the lawn, just a few feet away, was a magnificent bull elk with a full rack of antlers silhouetted against the pale early sky. Female elk surrounded him. The animals against the backdrop of mountains was a picture of unspeakable beauty. I cried out and was filled with joy. It seemed a miracle, sent to me by a loving Heavenly Father, to assure me that life was worth living and to be enjoyed, even in the face of cancer. For the first time since the diagnosis, I had a feeling of light-heartedness.

I was making great strides toward mental and spiritual health, and I had a certainty of God's love, but I had not yet fully gained the power and sound mind promised me. I still had too many moments of worry and fear. Now, though, I was open to getting more help through therapy. A friend had told me about Angela, a counselor who based her practice on teaching of God's love and His words in scripture. She was not of my faith, but she was a devout believer, and when she found that I believed in Christ too, she read a scripture each counseling session.

One day she read aloud in her gentle voice the account in Matthew telling of the woman with a long-time issue of blood, who had such faith that she knew if she could but touch the hem of Christ's robe, she would be healed. Christ knew instantly when she touched Him, turning in the crowds of people who pressed in upon Him, to ask who it was. When she confessed, He told her, *"Daughter, be of good comfort; thy faith hath made thee whole; go in peace."*

When Angela read those words to me, I felt an unexplainable, indescribable jolt shake my body. It was not painful, but it was extremely strong. Tears began to flow. I did not sob, there was no drama, but the tears rolled down my face, steadily and gently, for perhaps ten minutes while Angela silently handed me tissues. When the tears ceased, and I got up to leave, she said, softly, "He was here."

In the mountains watching the elk, and in the therapist's office, I vividly felt God's presence and His love for me. What beautiful gifts he bestowed upon me in my time of need! At last, I felt ready to face the future, whatever it might bring.

When Joseph Smith was held in Liberty Jail, the Lord told him, *". . . peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment . . . All these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good."* I learned the truth of these words in my own year of trial when my life was threatened by cancer and I endured brutal chemotherapy to conquer it. All of it was "for my good," as I became strong in faith and courage.

I am grateful for God's love and tender mercy, and for all that He taught me through the scripture given to me when I most needed it: *"For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind."* I am cancer-free now, but I still repeat those words frequently. They have become part of me, helping me face the challenges that come my way.

STUDY IT OUT

LINDSAY DENTON

But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right. — Doctrine and Covenants 9 : 8

I was almost 21, and the path of my future was branching. I looked down each trail as far as I could, my mind exploring the possibilities of each potential parallel life.

I was home from BYU for the summer between my junior and senior years. I had been dating a wonderful man for ten months, and we had talked about marriage. I knew that if I went back to BYU, where he was, we would likely be engaged soon. I loved him and we were good for each other, but I didn't feel ready to get married.

For as long as I could remember, I'd wanted to go on a mission. Now that I was nearly able to serve — my birthday was three short months away — I felt hesitant. Hesitant to serve, but also hesitant to give up that dream. Earlier in the year, my dad, knowing I was already struggling with this looming decision, had offered to give me a blessing. We both fasted in preparation; we both vibrated with the spirit we felt; and we both, I think, were surprised by his words.

"Whatever you choose," he'd said, "I bless you to have no regrets."

He could not have known that my biggest fear about getting married was that I might always regret not serving a mission, but after that experience, both of us privately thought I was probably going to get married soon.

As autumn fast approached and the need to decide was coiling like a tensed spring inside me, I was unsure. I felt the weight of my options in my hands like smooth stones, and, hoping for illumination, I took them to God in prayer.

I remember kneeling in the basement bedroom of my childhood, feeling as though I existed somewhere in the middle space between girl and grown-up, and pouring out my soul to the Heavenly Father I'd long trusted. I spoke of my love for my boyfriend, my worries about getting married so young, my long-held desire to serve a mission, my fear that my reasons for wanting to serve weren't pure enough. My body shook with the intensity of my emotion. "I think I want to go on a mission," I prayed. "Is that the right move for me?"

My relationship with God has been less like footprints in the sand and more like the road not taken in the yellow wood. I have never felt carried, yet each time I've stood at the fork of diverging paths, I've repeated to myself the only words I can remember God speaking to me, "I am pleased with your decision to serve."

God was silent.

I combined prayers with fasting. I read my scriptures. I journaled. I fasted and prayed some more. And I cried. A lot.

Finally, after a month of the most intense spiritual work I've expended in my life, my despair at not being heard turned to anger. My desires were righteous. I had given God the benefit of the doubt many times in the past when He hadn't answered me because I assumed my problems weren't all that important in the grand scheme of things, and He probably had better things to do than hold my hand through my adolescent angst. But this time, the stakes were high. I remember fire in my belly and desperation in my heart as I prayed the words, "maybe none of this matters to *you*. Maybe in the eternal scheme of things, it makes no difference who I marry or whether I serve a mission. But it matters to *me*. Isn't that enough?"

I'm not particularly proud of this, but after a couple of months, my prayers turned flippant. "Heavenly Father, since

you don't seem to care either way, I'm going to go on a mission. If you have a problem with that, then stop me."

I met with my bishop and started on my mission papers. I made my medical appointments and went shopping for clothes and enrolled in a temple preparation class. I broke up with my boyfriend.

I still prayed, but I was guarded. I'd erected a barrier between myself and the divine, not to keep God out, but to keep my heart whole. My father used to ignore me when I was growing up — sometimes when he was angry and sometimes when I wasn't worth his time — and being ignored by my Heavenly Father felt like a pointed jab at a sore spot in my soul.

Three days before I entered the Missionary Training Center, I stood before my congregation and spoke about God's light. At the conclusion, as I poured out my love for God, my desires and my fears, I felt slowly filled, as if by a pitcher of warm water. Words pressed into my mind like a seal on melted wax: *I am pleased with your decision to serve.*

The semester before my mission, I took a mission prep class at BYU. One thing the professor said stuck with me: "When your mission is over, go to the temple. In prayer, wrap your arms around your missionary service and present it to the Lord and ask if he is pleased with your offering. I promise you'll have one of the most transcendent spiritual experiences of your life."

My last day as a missionary, I went to the temple with the other missionaries who were going home. In the celestial room, I presented my mission to God. "I wasn't perfect," I whispered. "I hated tracting and I sometimes put policies before people. But I have learned so much from this experience, and I have learned how to love. I already know that what I did was enough, but will you please tell me? Are you pleased with my service?"

I waited, tears streaming, but I felt nothing.

After I got home, I tried again. I'd been exhausted and overwhelmed that day, I reasoned. I prepared myself and went to the temple fasting.

Still nothing.

I tried asking in different places and in different ways, and the silence that followed each of my requests felt exponentially larger. I began to worry that Heavenly Father saw my feelings and needs as silly.

Two months after coming home, I returned to my mission to visit and to be a bridesmaid at the wedding of a woman I'd taught. Before the ceremony, I saw her in the hallway outside of the temple sealing room. She ran the two steps between us and fiercely wrapped her arms around me. "I wouldn't be here today without you," she said, her voice tight with tears. "Thank you. Thank you." I returned her embrace and felt a flash of God with us in that moment.

In the next couple days, I had two other deeply humbling experiences where women I'd taught told me that my service as a missionary had changed their lives. I felt the Spirit nudge me in each of those moments, and I recognized that my plea for recognition was being answered in a more meaningful, tangible way than I could have hoped for.

Later, in prayer, I thanked Heavenly Father for not giving me what I thought I wanted right when I had asked for it. "This was better," I said. "You were right."

There was once — only once — that I received strong guiding input from God, and it was without me even having asked for guidance. I'd been dating a guy for a couple of months, and though we were far from getting engaged, things were moving fast. One morning I woke up to my stomach churning, a pervasive feeling of unease tingling in all my nerves. I felt unsettled. I waited it out for a few days, hoping for relief, but I knew in my bones what I needed to do. My boyfriend and I broke up, and my turmoil eased.

I didn't understand at the time why God told me "no" in such a clear and unmistakable way when I hadn't even tried bringing Him into the conversation yet. Looking back, there were several red flags in that relationship, and I'm confident I would have figured out on my own that my boyfriend and I were incompatible before too much more time had passed. I eventually recognized that I'd gained confidence from this experience: because He'd stopped me once before, I had faith that if any subsequent decisions to move forward were wrong, God would let me know.

These precious few brushes with the Divine notwithstanding, the overwhelming majority of my pleas for guidance or comfort or answers have gone unacknowledged. I've made a lot of excuses for God's silence in my life over the years: maybe I didn't try hard enough, or my desires weren't pure enough, or I asked in the wrong way. Maybe God had

answered, but I wasn't in tune enough to understand. Maybe I was unworthy or lacked faith. Maybe my problems were insignificant. Maybe, despite my urgent need, the Lord would answer in His own time because He knew what I needed better than I did. In short, the fault for our one-sided communication was never God's; it was always mine.

Earlier this year, I participated in Lent; part of my observances involved reaching for the Divine with complete earnestness for the first time in a long time. I put forth all of my effort and allowed myself to be vulnerable in my search for God. I tried prayer, different forms of meditation, and visualization exercises. I read scripture and listened to devotionals. I cried to God and asked for communion, for connection, for kinship.

God did not reach back.

A younger version of myself would have sighed in resignation and reexamined my intent, my faith, my worthiness to determine a reason for the divine neglect. This time, however, I found myself at an impasse. I could no longer make excuses for Heavenly Father like a woman does for her emotionally distant lover. I had to concede, to myself and to God, that the connection I had been striving for — one of revelation, of closeness, of reciprocity — wasn't going to happen.

My relationship with God has been less like footprints in the sand and more like the road not taken in the yellow wood. I have never felt carried, yet each time I've stood at the fork of diverging paths, I've repeated to myself the only words I can remember God speaking to me, "I am pleased with your decision to serve."

Your decision. My *decision*.

I don't know what to make of the fact that God's promises in scripture, that those who seek will find, who ask will receive, who study it out will feel it is right, have been largely unfulfilled in my life. But I have learned, partly from past experience and partly from an ancient knowing in the deepest parts of myself, that God trusts me to make my own decisions.

And that has made all the difference.

THE LAMENT OF LAMAN

JACK CHRISTENSEN

"I beheld, after they had dwindled in unbelief they became a dark, and loathsome and filthy people full of idleness and all manner of abominations."
— 1 NEPHI 12:23

And it came to pass,
That I Laman
Read the words of
My brother
Nephi
And my heart was cleft in twain

Forgive me
My brother
Mine unbelief
Our God has sold
My birthright
Our father's love
Has been usurped
Left to inherit
A river
Our family abandoned

Tell me
My brother
Does not a river meander
Seek the easiest path
Is not this idleness
Do we not cleanse ourselves
In the river
Behold is this the filth
You speak of

Or is filth judgment
Hatred because of mine unbelief
Intolerance of my difference
This
My brother Is loathsome
This
My brother
Is abomination

AN UNCONVENTIONAL STUDY OF HOLY TEXTS

INTERVIEW WITH JANA RIESS

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Photo: Aaron Burden, Unsplash

Since 2008, Jana Riess has been an editor in the publishing industry, primarily working in the areas of religion, history, popular culture, ethics, and biblical studies. She holds degrees in religion from Wellesley College and Princeton Theological Seminary, and a Ph.D. in American religious history from Columbia University. She is the author or co-author of many books, including The Prayer Wheel*;* Flunking Sainthood*;* What Would Buffy Do?*;* Mormonism for Dummies*; and* The Writer's Market Guide to Getting Published*. Her book* The Twible *won first place in the non-fiction category in the Writer's Digest Annual Self-Published Book Awards. Her book* The Next Mormons: The Rising Generation of Latter-day Saints *will be released in March 2019. She is currently a senior columnist for Religion News Service.*

As a young woman, when did you decide to be a scholar and when/why did you decide to be a religious scholar?

It's hard to answer that question because although I am generally a person who always has a plan for the future, my career has consisted of a whole series of unexpected changes in direction. I never decided to be a writer or a scholar, really. When I was young I wanted to be a lawyer and possibly a politician, which makes me laugh now. I read biographies of women in politics in the 1980s, like Pat Schroeder and Bella Abzug — and women from political history, like Frances Perkins. They were the people I looked up to and wanted to emulate.

Meanwhile, though, I was a voracious reader as a kid. I used to walk to school while reading a book, or I'd read one on the bus, or while sitting on the playground. I wasn't a loner — I've always been strangely extroverted for a bookworm — but I loved nothing more than to escape into books. I would stay home from school, which was often boring, to read books, which were always exciting.

In college I majored in religion and minored in political science, basically the two things you're told never to bring up in polite conversation (if such a thing as "polite" conversation even exists anymore as a goal in our culture). And then after college I went to divinity school to become a minister. The joke is that I went to divinity school to become a Presbyterian pastor and graduated from there neither Presbyterian nor a pastor, because I converted to Mormonism while I was a student. Awkward career change!

So I did what I knew how to do: more school. The new goal was to become a professor of American religious history and also a religion journalist. My new heroes were people like Gus Niebuhr, who covered religion back then for the *New York Times*. I wanted the Ph.D. but I was aware of the terrible job market in academia, which has only worsened since then.

Then, when I was writing my dissertation, my junior adviser, who had done everything right in the pursuit of tenure, was denied tenure. It was a terrible miscarriage of justice and basically brought home to me that academia could be brutal. I had been supplementing my grad school stipend for several years as a book reviewer, so when a position opened up for a religion book review editor for *Publishers Weekly*, I applied and got the job. It was an exciting thing for me to be immersed in the world of publishing, and the job brought together my love of books with my ongoing fascination for religion. That was a big year for me: I had a baby, started at PW, and wrote my dissertation. I didn't sleep much that year! Anyway, I am now a freelance editor, working primarily but not exclusively with authors who write about history, religion, and sociology. I also write a regular column for Religion News Service, so I get to hang out with journalists and writers.

It's been an interesting journey with some twists and turns along the way. I think in today's job market it's important to be as versatile as you can, with multiple skill sets, so that you can have more options.

Many of your books are organized around time and segments — yearly, monthly, daily, even by tweet! — what appeals to you about this way of thinking about religious practice?

I'm delighted that you noticed this, because I hadn't really noticed it myself! And you're right. I'm actually very intrigued by time and our relationship to it. In Mormonism, we have a strong focus on history and its relevance for today, which is something I share and am always glad to see. But we don't have a robust understanding of liturgical time and how vital it is to the rhythms of the Christian life.

As I write this we are in the second week of Advent, a season of waiting and preparation and penance. I would describe the mood in my husband's Episcopal church as one of somber joy — everyone is excited for Christmas but also cognizant of the spiritual development that has to happen before we are prepared to welcome Christ in a meaningful way. This is even more pronounced in Lent, the six weeks before Easter. In the Mormon tradition it makes me crazy how we simply ignore Lent and Holy Week, skipping right to the glory and triumph of Easter. We are a people who seem uncomfortable acknowledging the reality of pain. We want

to remove the cross from our iconography so we are not focusing on Jesus' suffering. While I appreciate the need for moderation — there are whole branches of Christianity that have probably overemphasized holy suffering — we have gone too far in the other direction.

So in my writing this probably creeps in. I'm very attached to the liturgical calendar, and more so as I age. There is comfort in waxing and waning in the rhythms of the church year. There is comfort in not having to imagine we are the first or most important people to have ever gone through whatever we're going through. And there's peace in not having to pretend that suffering doesn't utterly suck.

One of your focuses has been to write about and lead discussions looking at literature and popular works — Harry Potter, Twilight, and Buffy the Vampire Slayer — through a religious lens. How do these conversations lead to more insight into both the source material and spiritual concepts they may reflect?

Studying pop culture is important because, at its root, it means we are studying people: what we love and hate, why something strikes a nerve in one era and not another. Popular culture is, by definition, about the masses and what we care about in terms of books, food, television, film, holidays, and now social media — what we are producing and consuming in order to be entertained and inspired. So of course I'm going to find that interesting. I am all in.

So particularly as a woman, I'm always asking where the women are in each text: what are they doing, and what are they allowed to do? How have we interpreted this text over time?

And in our time, pop culture has also become a primary means of connection and solidarity, where people bond through fan culture or shared affinity groups on social media. That's interesting to me because bringing people together in a collective way is traditionally a function that religion has played in society. The root of religion is *lig*, which is about connection, about being bound; this is where we get words like ligament and ligature. So *religion* is, traditionally, that thing that binds us to each other again.

But now pop culture is playing that role like never before. And as you say, conversations about them can lead to deep insights into the source material, and it doesn't even have to be profound source material in the way that Harry Potter is often theologically profound (King's Cross station! Good heavens). It can be simple and honest, like *The Shack*, whose popularity reveals a lot about what humans in our time and place are hoping for and needing from God, but does so through a fairly formulaic plot.

Does your identity as a woman inform how you read the scriptures?

Holy cow, yes. I think I was still in my first year of college when I read parts of Phyllis Trible's *Texts of Terror.* And for me, because I hadn't grown up inhabiting the Bible in any way and had only become a Christian in high school, I was often reading those stories for the first time. I think it was in that book that I learned for the first time about Japheth's daughter and Lot sending out his daughters to be gang raped. My first response was probably "What the *hell*? *That's* in the Bible?" I just couldn't believe that such appalling stories existed alongside Jesus in what was supposed to be a sacred book that would bring me closer to God. I certainly was not feeling closer to God after reading about a woman whose family chopped her into twelve pieces just to prove a point.

We talk a good deal these days, possibly too much, about trauma and trigger warnings. But seriously, the Old Testament should come with one. Don't get me wrong, I absolutely love the Old Testament. It's endlessly fascinating the way God shows up in precisely these stories that read like ancient horror movies. But as a woman, that is never not my body being dismembered or sent out to be raped. That is never not my very existence being sold out by men who are supposed to care about my well being.

From 2009 to 2013 I tweeted the Bible, a chapter a day, with humorous commentary, and all of that is brought together in the book *The Twible*. It's a funny book, I hope, but it also explores some of this darker side of the Bible. Those are things we rarely talk about in Gospel Doctrine class, where we're relentlessly focused on carving up ancient texts in ways that support current church teachings and modern lives. (All churches do this, to some extent. In Catholic and high church Protestant circles it's interesting to compare the weekly lectionary readings, which are parsed out over the course of

several years, with all of the also-ran texts that did not make it into the lectionary at all or are offered only as alternate readings. Although some individuals may read the Bible from cover to cover, as I did in preparing *The Twible*, whole religions generally do not.)

So particularly as a woman, I'm always asking where the women are in each text: what are they doing, and what are they allowed to do? How have we interpreted this text over time? Interpretation matters; translation matters. In Romans 16:7 Junia, which is attested only as a woman's name, is listed by Paul as an apostle; for centuries the Christian church rendered this as Junius, a man's name, because it was so outrageous to imagine there could have been a female apostle.

Your most recent research looks at young people and their relationship with religion, specifically the Mormon church. Why is this topic important to you and what conversations are you hoping to inspire?

Thanks for asking about this project, which is close to my heart. It's prompted by my concern that we are losing so many of our young adults right now. I wanted to find out through means of social science whether that was only something that *felt* true because the stories of leaving are the ones that get told more visibly or it was actually, statistically, true. And unfortunately, it is true. According to the General Social Survey, we used to keep around three-quarters of our young adults, and that has fallen to just under half. In Pew's data we're faring a little better, keeping about six in ten of our Millennials. So while it's unwise to be married to the findings of any one survey, those studies plus the internal research conducted by the Church itself show that we are facing a real problem. This is hardly unique to Mormonism — the entire landscape of religious affiliation in America is changing — but if Mormonism ever had any immunity to the problem of losing our young adults, we've lost it.

So I teamed up with Benjamin Knoll, who is a political scientist, to field a nationally representative survey of Mormons that would delve into some of the "whys" behind those statistics. It is quite expensive to do a national survey of minority populations, so I raised the money via a Kickstarter campaign in 2016. It was amazing to me to see how many people donated to support the research — mostly people I had never met in person. (If you are reading this and you helped to support this project, thank you from the bottom of my heart.) I think that the donors just wanted answers to what is going on, which I try to do in *The Next Mormons* book by drawing from the data and from extensive personal interviews with Millennials and a few Gen Xers.

I love this generation, frankly. But saying that is not especially helpful. The generational divide I see widening in the Church is not improved when older people just keep telling younger people that they're a chosen generation, they are remarkable, blah blah blah. And then on the other hand in the Church we publicly chastise those same young adults for having different views of homosexuality, or for waiting longer to get married. The messages are quite confusing.

What older people need to do is mostly shut up. We do a rather dismal job of listening to young adults in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We mobilize them for service in beautiful ways, which is great; we give them a robust theology that can help them through life. But we have no institutional means of actually hearing their concerns, let alone allowing them to take the lead.

I recently read an evangelical book about Millennials that bemoaned the fact that so many pastors in charge today are Baby Boomers, and they're reluctant to hand the reins to men and women in their thirties. I just wanted to say I wish we had their problems! The primary decision-makers of our church have *children* who are Baby Boomers. The members of our First Presidency came of age in the 1940s. And while there's a case to be made that gospel truths are timeless, it's not the timeless portions about Christ's love that are the things young adults are hearing most loudly in General Conference. It's the condemnations of things and people they care about that tend to reverberate most.

So *The Next Mormons* project is essentially an invitation to listen to what young adult Mormons and former Mormons are thinking about, what they are passionate about. The survey results were sometimes very surprising. Mostly I hope it just opens up conversations that need to happen between parents and their young adult children, between YSA bishops and their ward members, etc. We don't have the luxury of assuming that the culture has not shifted in fundamental ways, and that the old ways of reaching young adults are going to remain successful.

"Care Bear Stare" | Kathryn Knudsen | @kathrynwknudsen

LOCATION, LIBERATION, AND CHRIST'S ATONEMENT

PAULA BAKER

In the Christian tradition, it's sometimes customary to open a sermon by stating one's social location. A social location is where a person is within society. It creates the lens through which that person views the world. In lieu of a traditional Mormon introduction, I'm going to talk about my social location, as this plays into today's topic of the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

I am a white, cisgender, mostly heterosexual female. I come from a blue collar family and currently reside in the middle class with a white collar job. I'm a lifelong member of the Church with pioneer ancestry on both sides. I am an able-bodied person who speaks English fluently. I am a Christian. I had access to good schools. I have two master's degrees. My childhood does not contain any clearly identifiable trauma. Although I take medication for mental illness, I manage well and have good healthcare. I am divorced and childless.

The Kingdom of God, brought forth by the Atonement, isn't one where our debts are merely paid. In the Kingdom of God debts are canceled — freeing everyone, not just debtors. This is downright radical.

As for my mindset, I wasn't born into a liberal family, yet I do consider myself a liberal and view society through the lens of power and conflict theory. I'm a social scientist at heart. I like figuring out people . . . and God. I consider myself an amateur theologian. While I tried hard not to be interested in the so-called "bad stuff" of the world — sin, sorrow, and the like — positivity never really caught on for me. I see the light, but I'm drawn to the dark. I'll talk about trauma more readily than I'll tell you about last night's dinner. I see hope in the shadows, because to me that's where hope is trustworthy.

All this is to say that, despite my privilege and maybe precisely because of it, I actively work to free myself and others from oppression by accessing and accepting the liberation that comes through the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

When I think about the topic of the Atonement, I don't think about how it works; I don't really buy into the substitution theory that says Jesus Christ paid our debts. I also don't think about how to apply it; the Atonement isn't a topical cream! What comes to my mind is the Atonement's function and its effect on my life. For me, this means focusing on the liberation that comes by way of the Atonement.

While some Christian sects have liberation theology, we do not usually think about the Atonement in this way in Mormonism. A quick search of General Conference talks reveals the word *liberation* is traditionally used in conjunction with social movements of the 60s and 70s: women's liberation, sexual liberation, etc. Likewise, a quick LDS.org scripture search reveals no matches for the term *liberation*, although *bondage* does appear. For example, in October 2013, Elder Cook counseled us to avoid the bondage that comes from sin, addiction, and false ideologies.

What tends to be discussed in Mormonism is the avoidance of enslavement. However, I've come to believe we're already in bondage. Perhaps this is why I was so surprised when I

learned about the liberation element of the Atonement of Jesus Christ. It wasn't something I thought I needed.

I do believe that through my agency I can avoid some kinds of bondage. I can choose not to give into the natural man as opposed to putting it off. However, enslavement is not something I can avoid entirely, no matter how hard I try. Instead, my task is to recognize the ways I'm already in bondage, both as an oppressed person and an individual who oppresses others.

The liberation offered by the Atonement of Christ is exactly what Jesus said he came here to do for us. Out of all the scriptures in the Old Testament, He chose Isaiah's passages about liberation to describe his mission. Isaiah 61: 1–2 (*NRSV*) reads:

> *The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,*
> *because the Lord has anointed me;*
> *he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,*
> *to bind up the brokenhearted,*
> *to proclaim liberty to the captives,*
> *and release to the prisoners;*
> *to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,*
> *and the day of vengeance of our God;*

In earlier chapters, God proclaims the type of fasting God wants. Isaiah 58:6 reads:

> *This is the kind of fast day I'm after:*
> *to break the chains of injustice,*
> *get rid of exploitation in the workplace,*
> *free the oppressed,*
> *cancel debts.*

I thought Jesus paid my debts! That's completely different from canceling them! Other translations of the Bible, like the *NRSV* and the *KJV*, speak of breaking yokes, which is much different imagery than Jesus bearing my burdens.

The concept of Jesus Christ paying our debts is traditional Mormon doctrine, most notably outlined by Boyd K. Packer in his April 1977 talk called "The Mediator." He tells a parable in which a mediator pays a debt to a creditor, one the debtor cannot hope to repay. Mercy is extended to the debtor, and the creditor receives justice. Packer talks of spiritual debt created by sins, mistakes, and imperfections. Without Christ's Atonement, the full weight of that debt would have to be borne by us. Yet Jesus's "generous terms have each item marked, 'Paid in Full.'"

While this framing of the Atonement can be useful, Jesus's use of scripture declares that His coming cancels debt. This is notable because debt cancellation not only liberates the debtor, it emancipates the creditor as well. Jesus awakens us to the ways we need liberation — and then continues His work to liberate us from those things.

The Kingdom of God, brought forth by the Atonement, isn't one where our debts are merely paid. In the Kingdom of God debts are canceled — freeing everyone, not just debtors. This is downright radical.

When you consider these teachings, it becomes clear that Jesus endangers the status quo, upsets the established order, and disrupts our assumptions about the ways the world must work. It's no wonder that he was killed for his message and it isn't surprising that His teachings are still rejected.
Now let me circle back to the concept of social location. What made me think I didn't need liberation (and that all I needed to do was avoid enslavement) was my social location. What did I need to be liberated from? I had my agency. All I needed to worry about was keeping the freedom I have, right? Wrong. I needed, and still need, liberation.

First, I need liberation from my ideological golden calves; they keep me from worshiping the real God. Second, I need liberation from my oppression of others.

First, let's talk about the Atonement liberating me from idol worship. In short, golden calves are idols, false Gods, a substitute for worshiping the real God. Let's update the Bible Dictionary's definition for our own use: "Under this symbol [we] profess to worship God, but such worship naturally soon degenerate[s] into a worship of the image itself." While our intentions are good in the beginning, we naturally start to hold the image of God in higher esteem than God himself. We seek to please the idol instead of God.

Most of my idols aren't actually idols. They are ideas. I was lucky to have good parents. They taught me that relationships and righteousness were more important the possessions and popularity. But somehow I ended up worshiping relationships and righteousness more than God. The ideals turned into idols. My golden calf was the nuclear family.

I started out with actual truth and good intentions, as all idol worship does. Families are given by God and help us come closer to God. Yet the family became an idol when I valued it too highly. I viewed the family as the only purpose of this life

and as the sole reason for the next life. Then I started making sacrifices to the god called family in order to obtain the blessings of a family.

Imagine my surprise when those blessings didn't materialize for me. Instead, my ex-husband and I went through four years of infertility and several miscarriages. Then he left.

It shouldn't have been so surprising. Sacrificing your life, aspirations, and very self to a golden calf will never yield any real result. Yet I was surprised. Perhaps this was how I learned that I had been worshiping a golden calf and not a living, breathing God.

I did healing work surrounding the loss of my (future) family. I applied the enabling Atonement like an ointment; I let Jesus Christ pay my debts and take away my pain. I "overcame" my trials, so to speak, and understood that things would eventually be "made right."

I was good.

However, hoping things were made right in the next life and overcoming these trials was the problem. I was still captive to the ideology that something needed to be overcome and made right in the first place.

Christ liberated me from that doctrine.

Christ's liberation did not call for healing or overcoming. His liberation removed the scales from my eyes and allowed me to see that nothing needed to be made right because it was already right. Christ's liberating grace destroyed my idols and my worship of them. Christ did exactly what He promised in the words of Isaiah. He proclaimed the year of his favor. He enacted vengeance on that particular idol — which is an idol easily kept. Now I am free to love who I want to love. I'm not bound by an idol's definition of family and declarations of who I can spend my life with. Instead, I accept my desires as coming from a living, breathing God who loves me. And this liberation happened here, in this life, not the next. Without seeing God as the bearer of blessings or trials, I can start to understand the connection between people. When that happens, God is here, present on earth, not living in the sky near Kolob.

A few months ago, I re-read the story of Exodus. I was taught to liken myself to the Hebrews, but this time I found myself identifying with Pharaoh. My social location suggests I am Pharaoh. I have freedom to do what I want. I have a voice. The people in power move to give people like me even more — and that price is paid for by oppressing others, just like Pharaoh's power was. His monuments, wealth, and influence came at the expense of Hebrew enslavement. Maybe my feelings, my priorities, my preferences, my comfort, my freedom, my "needs" also keep people in chains.

God took the side of the Hebrews. God always takes the side of the oppressed in order to liberate them from injustice. The Hebrews were liberated because God was in solidarity with them, not because Pharaoh wanted to let them go. They took their freedom with plagues and death and the wrath of God because appeals to Pharaoh's "better nature" fell on deaf ears. Again and again Moses said, "Let my people go," and Pharaoh said, "No."

How often do I say "no" to oppressed people asking for their liberation? How often do I respond with "All Lives Matter" when someone is trying to communicate what their oppression tells them: that black lives don't matter? Do I say "no" when transgender people lobby for the right to use restrooms that help them feel physically safe and emotionally validated? I am the Pharaoh, more often than not, and I need to let go of my power and let the people I enslave take their liberation from me.

The Atonement of Jesus Christ opens my eyes to the reasons why I need to oppress people in the first place. It helps me ask the right questions. Jesus doesn't merely ask me to be the Good Samaritan; he calls me to fix the road where people are getting hurt and help realize justice for marginalized communities.

While helping the oppressed is admirable, I don't want to just be a Good Samaritan. I want to eliminate the circumstances that make Good Samaritans necessary. Jesus proclaimed, "The Kingdom of God is at hand," and this is true. I now have to see it, grasp it, and then enact it.

The Atonement liberates me to do that work, one of both justice and mercy. Grace liberates me to do its works. The Atonement liberates me from oppression and from my role as the oppressor. Jesus does not merely pay the debt; He ushers in a new world in which the debt is canceled. Obsolete. Unnecessary.

This is my testimony of Jesus Christ, His mission, and His Atonement.

BRICK & MARTYR

WINNING ESSAY

STEPHANIE SORENSEN

When most young girls my age were likely playing "house," I loved to play "office" in our unfinished basement, where I would spend hours working at my makeshift desk of miscellaneous storage boxes and bins. Somewhere amidst all the make-believe, I discovered something much more exciting than cardboard and plastic: a shiny, golden metal trunk with brass hinges and buckles. I eagerly lifted the heavy lid and rummaged through the contents. It appeared to be historic family records: files, photographs, obituaries, and newspaper clippings. Strangely, sifting through the collection of photographs, I couldn't place any of the faces. In fact, none of the names looked familiar either.

Yet the images stuck with me, even though I never had occasion for a second peek. Years later, when I was only seventeen years old, it would utterly steal the breath from my chest to learn that those names and faces, etched in my memory, were those of my father's many wives — the ones chosen for him in the next life. This life-altering news was revealed to me during an unforgettable FHE. That's when it happened. That's when my mom snapped. No, that's when whatever *was* snapped within her fused together. I witnessed my mother metaphorically raise herself from all fours, stand upright, and discover her spine. Her loaded words, ". . . and what about those other women!" forced the pretty brass hinges clean off that golden trunk where our closely guarded family skeletons were kept. Just as my mother's life was coming together, mine was falling apart. Gone forever were my days of innocent make-believe.

I had known all of my life that my dad was a real piece of work, but that day finally put him in the context I'd been aching to comprehend. My mind worked in reverse, analyzing the old memories that flooded my brain: why did his kisses burn like a branding iron? Why did I dread being alone with him? Why did my friends avoid him whenever they came to my house? Why did my best friend ask, "What's *wrong* with your dad?" Finally, years later, I knew the answer: with Doctrine & Covenants section 132 as his anthem, my father covertly practiced spiritual wifery for decades. He continues to do so today.

It would seem that all religions have their own unique breed of fanaticism: Muslim Jihadism, the Catholic crusades, and Christian racial supremacist groups, to name only a few.

Why did I dread being alone with him? Why did my friends avoid him whenever they came to my house? . . . Finally, years later, I knew the answer: with Doctrine & Covenants section 132 as his anthem, my father covertly practiced spiritual wifery for decades.

Mormonism is not exempt. Most people would believe that the only strand of Mormon fanaticism broke off a century ago and became known as the Fundamentalists. They likely don't suspect that fanatics are hiding in plain sight, passing the sacrament, leading the Boy Scouts, serving in the temple, or, as in my case, hiding within the four walls of my own home.

Home is a place you're supposed to feel safe. It's a place you ought to be able to self-express and to be vulnerable. It's where you forge your identity and establish a worldview. Every brick of your home represents a core belief, a principle, a fact, a paradigm. And those four sturdy brick walls, combined with a solid foundation and a sturdy roof, protect you from the elements. They keep the bad guys out.

Unless, of course, the "bad guy" happens to live with you.

So sheltered and safe within our four walls, his little strand of fundamentalism waxed strong. By tapping into the power of personal revelation, he found the perfect way to justify his misogyny and sex addiction. He wasn't the first. Man has often used God to justify his crimes and to satiate his appetites. Somehow we excuse it when those crimes were committed by a prophet. For such cases, we don't call it crime — we call it revelation.

Then what case can be made for my father — not a prophet, not a "Brother Joseph," but just an ordinary Joe Shmoe? In his narcissistic way, he yearned to be a prophet — with all its martyrdom, glory, and revelation — so he decided to assume the role as best he could. The devotees he sought to claim

"She Dreamed a New Dream" | Elizabeth Sanchez | @elizabeth_sanchez_art

Elizabeth Sowsky

were his five children, a heartbroken wife, and his growing passel of spirit wives. Even after my mother divorced him, some of his children disowned him, and he remarried a "fair virgin" (his precise words), he continues to gather women to his side, collecting names and faces from both the living and the dead.

Despite all, I couldn't help but love him. Don't all little girls love their daddies? But even though I loved him, I ceased to respect him, and my disrespect of him kept me alive emotionally. I was the sassiest, most disrespectful daughter a patriarchal father could dread. So long as I had a tongue in my mouth that could call out his abuse, his injustice, and his bigotry, then he couldn't snuff me out. Certainly, there were nights, my head throbbing on a tear-soaked pillow, that I felt defeated. His verbal abuse, riddled with painful nicknames like "twit," "maggot," or "Femi-nazi," cut deep. But for some reason, during family scripture study or while receiving a priesthood blessing from him, my flame would burst back into life. Though I didn't understand it at the time, the nature of my father's abuse was twofold: his verbal tirades on one hand, and a weaponized God on the other. He used the scriptures — holy, pure and undefiled — to dominate, oppress, and conquer. It was particularly section 132 of the Doctrine & Covenants that he treasured most.

One excerpt reads:

> *And again, as pertaining to the law of the priesthood — if any man espouse a virgin, and desire to espouse another, and the first give her consent, and if he espouse the second, and they are virgins, and have vowed to no other man, then is he justified; he cannot commit adultery for they are given unto him; for he cannot commit adultery with that that belongeth unto him and to no one else.*
>
> *And if he have ten virgins given unto him by this law, he cannot commit adultery, for they belong to him, and they are given unto him; therefore is he justified.*
>
> — D&C 132:61-62

Words like these cut deeper than any of his disturbing pet names. When he called me a "twit," I knew he was a jerk. But when he read God's words, and said the priesthood made him adultery-proof and allowed him to "own" women, I believed even God was in on it. They were in cahoots. If God was the architect of all my pain, then I wanted nothing to do with Him — with either of them!

Resolving this spiritual bind has proven to be the wrestle of my life.

Therefore is he justified. Those four words sum up the entirety of my father's psyche. Every kind of addiction is brutal and not easily overcome. But perhaps it's fair to say that a sex addiction, combined with a very unique God/religion addiction, boasts some of the lowest recovery rates out there. The key problem is getting the person to admit there's a problem. God Himself has given them explicit permission. No mere human being on Earth could ever compete for legitimacy — no sobbing wife, no sassy daughter, no angry son, no suspicious boss, no concerned bishop, no licensed therapist. God addicts hold the ultimate trump card: God justifies their behavior. They are beyond scrutiny. They are beyond accountability, responsibility, or morality.

Being raised by a father with undiagnosed mental illness, addictive behaviors, a violent temper, and a real gift for verbal abuse left me in a state of numbness for much of my young adult life. Whenever I was brought back into my body — particularly through romantic or sexual touch — it forced me to feel. To *really* feel. And it was painful and jarring. The first time a boy held my hand, I went into convulsions. The first time a boy kissed me, I wanted to puke. The first time I experienced sexual climax (and for many years to come), I sobbed uncontrollably. I spent the first decade of my adult life overcoming that numbness, pained by the sensation of coming to life. You know the prickles you get after one of your limbs has fallen asleep and all the blood is rushing back in — that's what it felt like *everywhere*.

Being alive hurts.

As I started to inhabit my body more and more, instead of numbing out, the severity of my wounds became apparent. I was exhibiting all the symptoms of sexual abuse, but with no physical violation to explain it. Though my father had never forced himself upon me physically, I received his emotional and verbal abuse, his misogyny, and his theology into my body. I had been spiritually raped.

It was throughout the following decade that I began to realize how interconnected my childhood abuse was to my childhood religion. It became a quest for clarity — a separation of church and state, if you will. If I could just separate those two things, if I could just judge my father on his own merits and judge the Church on its own, then I might

be able to make sense of it all. But where did my father end and the Church begin?

After years of devoted researching, questioning, and healing, clarity came. For so long, I tried to believe that my dad was all bad and the Church was all good. But it simply wasn't so. Working through the nuance was difficult and took time. Finally, I saw my dad as a man, disentangled from everything else. I saw in him the good, the bad, the beautiful, the ugly. I felt free to love him *and* to hate his choices. Then there was my religion, bafflingly and equally riddled with color. Where was the black-and-whiteness that I so craved?

I had always said that if I could just extract my father from the equation, then my religious turmoil would naturally resolve. But when that day came — once I could see them both separately — that's the moment my religious turmoil exploded. Without my dad to blame everything on, how did I account for it all: the patriarchy, the sexism, the adultery, the power corruption, and the coercion that was rampant in my religion? Once I took on those questions, *my* own fractured spine fused together. I was awake. I was in my body. I was free.

Today, I mindfully engage with both my father and my religion, but on my terms. So long as clear boundaries are defined and respected, I have a working relationship with both. Most importantly, I no longer find my identity or salvation through either of them, despite the scars I will forever bear. Orthodoxy has utterly left me, with all its doctrines, dogma, and authority. In its place is a wild, unruly jungle of ambiguity that I relish, leaving me free to explore, interpret, and discover truth for myself.

A few months ago my father and I spoke on the phone. He was deeply troubled, full of conflict about my two siblings who have publicly voiced their separation from Mormonism, broken-hearted that they, according to him, have sacrificed the Celestial Kingdom. I said to him, "Dad, do you really believe that there will be empty chairs at your table in this Heaven you've imagined for yourself?"

He strongly reproached me. "I didn't imagine Heaven, it's been revealed. I don't get to choose which doctrines I accept and which doctrines I don't."

I replied, "For a church that so loudly upholds the family, it seems to me quite strange that, when all is said and done, God just divides families up for all eternity." There was a pause. Then I felt a rush of energy in my words: "Dad, your theology is broken. And it seems so clear that you're choosing your broken theology over your family. But then again, you've done that before. . .and you'll do it again." My words hit me like a punch in the gut. My words hit him like a passing breeze. The face my father wears best of all, the one he will wear to his death, is the face of the martyr. He will die for his convictions.

I've often wondered what kind of person I'd be if my father had made different choices, if his mind had been clear and his thinking more expansive. Things would have been better, no doubt. I wouldn't have been so afraid to live, so afraid to love, so afraid to be seen. I would have enjoyed the sound of my own voice and the sight of my own body. I wouldn't have been so afraid of my own femininity. Maybe my tomboy self would have been more comfortable with the color pink and frilly, lacy dresses. I think I would have let myself cry a little more.

I try not to go down these alternative-universe roads too often. It's what *is* that has to count for something, not what *was*. Even if I didn't get to experience a healthy childhood, I have the pleasure of experiencing it now. As a mother, I get to say things to my own children that I longed to hear as a child. Then we all hear the words — my inner, stunted, little girl me *along* with my children — and we all grow up together.

What can be said to those of us who have ever loved a God-addict? For those who were raised by one? Married to one? Broken by one? You and I are left to sort through the rubble. My own childhood home, erected on proud, noble beliefs like God, priesthood, patriarchy, polygamy, Brother Joseph, the brethren, revelation, and authority, all came crashing down around me. Brick by brick, I have sorted through them all, carefully weighing and considering, determining which brick would be thrown out and which brick would make it into the reconstruction project.

After everything this journey has exacted from me, peace is finally my companion. It does hurt to be alive, but I've also never known anything so glorious. I stand in the rubble with my head held high. Only my house collapsed, after all, not me. My new home is still in process, but now that I've seen the stars, experienced the wide, expansive world, and glimpsed the vast universe beyond, one thing I know for certain: there will be no ceiling.

And that heavy, heavy brick called "Doctrine & Covenants section 132"? It burdens me no more.

ANNOUNCEMENT

REFLECTION ON ANAM CARA

By Rachel Rueckert
Winner of the 2018 Exponent II essay contest

My visit to Anam Cara was the best thing I have ever done for my writing. I made serious headway in my book (20,000 words in just a week) and felt more peace and clarity there than I have in years. Let's just say I now believe in Irish magic.

The stunning setting itself is an integral part of the experience. Sue Booth-Forbes has curated a true artist's oasis in the charming village of Eyries, Ireland. International artists from all corners of the globe come to Anam Cara year after year. The days are structured around work time and delicious, elaborate meals made with local ingredients. The lush grounds are covered with waterfalls, breathtaking views of the sea, and world-famous walking trails. The retreat is highly individualized and renewing, no matter what project people are working on or what stage of the project they are in.

I never anticipated winning this incredible, generous gift from the Exponent II essay contest, but it was the highlight of my year. I'll be forever grateful for the opportunity. I took a smooth, white rock from the beach home with me and keep it on my writing desk. Turning the luminous stone over in my hand reminds me of no less than the story of the Brother or Jared, inviting light and inspiration in exchange for honest effort, raw creativity, and an open heart.

I cannot wait to visit again. Absolutely everyone should participate in this contest.

EXPONENT II
SHARING MORMON WOMEN'S VOICES SINCE 1974

SUBSCRIBE TODAY

Have you checked out Exponent II's online store?

Besides subscriptions to the magazine (now with an option for automatic renewal or to give as a gift), we have our Illuminating Ladies coloring book, Habits of Being, eBooks of All God's Critters Got a Place in the Choir, Mormon feminist sticker sets, and more!

ORDER AT:
EXPONENTII.ORG/SHOP

CALENDAR

SPRING ISSUE

April 15
Deadline for subscriptions

End of May
Arrives to subscribers

SUMMER ISSUE

April 1
Deadline for submissions

July 15
Deadline for subscriptions

End of August
Arrives to subscribers

FALL ISSUE

July 1
Deadline for submissions

October 15
Deadline for subscriptions

End of November
Arrives to subscribers